

The Cost of School Food

October 2020

The Children's Society

“I tell my kid to make sure they eat all their school meals as it may be the only meal they have. I often have nothing to eat and any food I do have I give to my kid as they only get 1 meal a day – I don't have a meal many days” [Parent response from TCS survey, September 2020]¹

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the life of every child and their family in the country. Families with children have been among the hardest hit,² with job losses and increased costs of living from children being off school causing many families to struggle financially.³ The crisis has made life much harder for young people – especially those from low-income households, who have additional needs or whose parents have precarious immigration status.

One of the ways the government has acted to support low-income families through the pandemic has been through means-tested Free School Meals provision: rolling out a Free School Meals voucher scheme, extending provision throughout the Easter and summer holidays, and extending Free School Meals to some children affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds condition.

These measures have been welcome, but do not go far enough. The extension of Free School Meals to those affected by NRPF is only temporary (currently in place till the end of the Autumn 2020 school term) and subject to a review. Furthermore, currently only those families on Universal Credit who earn less than £7,400 a year are eligible for Free School Meals (excluding those covered by temporary transitional protections). This very low income threshold means that many low-income families risk being on the edge of Free School Meals eligibility, even though they might otherwise be struggling and would benefit from their children having Free School Meals.

To further explore this, The Children's Society commissioned a poll of around 1,000 parents of children aged 5-16 in state schools across the UK (undertaken in September 2020) to understand parents' experiences of paying for their children's school food, now they are mostly back in school following lockdown. Parents whose children do not receive Free School Meals were estimated to spend an average of £21.54 during a school week on food for their eldest child during their time at school.⁴ We also found that one in seven parents surveyed whose children are not receiving Free School Meals have been struggling with the costs of

¹ From a parent who took part in the survey, whose child is in receipt of Free School Meals.

² The Trussell Trust in early June reported that the number of families with children receiving emergency food parcels has almost doubled compared to the same period last year. See <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/06/03/food-banks-busiest-month/>. Polling from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on means-tested benefits also found the pandemic had caused 70% of low income families with children to cut back on essentials such as food and electricity <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/call-stronger-social-security-lifeline-children>

³ Findings from a survey conducted by CPAG UK during lockdown and school closures found that more than half of parents and carers who responded reported being moderately to extremely concerned about money. See https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/The-cost-of-learning-in-lockdown-UK-FINAL_0.pdf

⁴ N=662. Based on excluding those with total costs of £0 (4), those who responded 'Don't know' to at least one of the five meal options (38), and the (7) most extreme outliers with total costs above £90. Mean costs are estimated using midpoints of the cost ranges provided for each of the 5 items, and are only based on responses for those participants who provided costs for all 5 options: breakfast, lunch (school meal), lunch (packed lunch), snacks, others.

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food during the school day, since their child returned to school following the COVID-19 school closures.⁵ We estimate that this could represent around 885,000 children.⁶ Of those who have struggled,⁷ four in ten said they had cut down on the amount of food they bought for themselves and their family to be able to pay for their child's food during the school day, while others had borrowed money from friends and family (one in five).

Furthermore, around one in six parents (whose children do not receive Free School Meals) were very worried or somewhat worried about covering the costs of meals or snack for their children throughout the school year.⁸

Methodology

We sought to understand the costs and challenges facing parents in this uniquely difficult time by polling 1,002 parents of school-age children (aged 5-16) in state schools across the UK (representation based on natural fall out of respondents) about the cost of their children's food during the average school week, since they returned to school (since COVID-19 closures). The poll was carried out by Censuswide in September 2020.

Parents of children from independent schools were not included in the sample, nor were parents whose children don't attend school at all. Seven out of 10 parents surveyed said their oldest child did not receive Free School Meals. The majority of our analysis below focuses on this group (N=711).

Parents were asked to answer in relation to their oldest child. A quarter of parents who said that their child did not receive Free School Meals had one child; 51% had two children; 19% had three children, while 4% had four children and 1% had 5+.

Of this group, 57% of parent participants were female and 43% were male. The vast majority of respondents were aged between 25 and 54 years (93%), and the majority said their child was from a white ethnic background (87%).

Mean costs have been used to indicate average costs, with the most extreme outliers for total costs removed (see individual footnotes). We have otherwise tried to take the data at face value and present responses from all those who completed the survey who indicated that their child did not receive Free School Meals.

⁵ 14% where total N=711 (i.e. all those responding to the question who indicated that their child does not receive a Free School Meal).

⁶ Based on Department for Education figures on schools, pupils and their characteristics, we created a table to include all pupils in primary and secondary schools, excluding those in the infants, as all children aged 7 and under are entitled to Universal Infant Free School Meals: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/5eddd8dc-80f5-4950-b89b-2a585179b0fc>. This total is 8,890,000. We used this data in conjunction with our survey data to estimate how many children across England live in a family that has been affected by the cost of food. In our survey of 1,002 parents, 71% were not eligible for FSM. Of that, 14% struggled to cover the costs of their child's food during the school day, since schools returned.

⁷ N= 101. Parents who struggled and whose children do not receive FSM support. Respondents could chose multiple options.

⁸ 16% where total N=711. Parents were asked to indicate how worried they were about a predetermined list of expenses: school trips, school uniforms, books or equipment, breakfast, meals or snacks, travel to school, additional childcare, afterschool clubs.

Key findings

Average costs of school food per week

We conducted a poll of 1,002 parents, with 7 in 10 (71%) responding that their children did not receive Free School Meals (parent could indicate if their child received means tested or Universal Infant Free School Meals). We wanted to look at the costs and experiences of this group, who were not receiving any Free School Meals support, since their children had gone back to school following the earlier Covid-19 lockdown.

Those not receiving Free School Meals were estimated to pay on average £11.72 per week on lunches at school for their oldest child, with £6.27 spent on packed lunches and £5.45 on school lunches.⁹ This came on top of paying for breakfast, snacks and other items – with total estimated spending for those not receiving FSM coming to an average of £21.54 per oldest child per week.^{10 11}

It is important to note that parents were asked to answer in relation to their oldest child – within our sample, only a quarter of respondents had one child. More than half had two children. One in five (19%) of families in our survey (whose children are not receiving Free School Meals) had three children. Assuming these parents with three children were to spend the same amount on each child, their weekly spend on food for all their children while at school could be as much as around £64.62 per average week. In low income families with multiple children, these average weekly costs per child are likely to have a significant impact on family finances.

⁹ N=662. Mean costs have been used to indicate average costs. These costs are estimated using midpoints of the cost ranges provided for each of the 5 items (with the exception of '£0' or 'I never spend any money on this' which were costed as £0, and '£31+' which was costed as £31), and only for those participants who provided costs for all 5 options (i.e. anyone who responded 'Don't know' to an item was excluded): breakfast, lunch (school meal), lunch (packed lunch), snacks, others. Parents were asked to answer thinking about their eldest child. We excluded those with total costs of £0 (4) and the (7) most extreme outliers with total costs above £90 per week per child.

¹⁰ N=662. Mean costs have been used to indicate average costs. These costs are estimated using midpoints of the cost ranges provided for each of the 5 items (with the exception of '£0' or 'I never spend any money on this' which were costed as £0, and '£31+' which was costed as £31), and only for those participants who provided costs for all 5 options (i.e. anyone who responded 'Don't know' to an item was excluded): breakfast, lunch (school meal), lunch (packed lunch), snacks, others. Parents were asked to answer thinking about their eldest child. We excluded those with total costs of £0 (4) and the (7) most extreme outliers with total costs above £90 per week per child.

¹¹ There were slight variations based on region (comparing North (North East, North West, Scotland, Yorkshire and the Humber, and Northern Ireland), Midlands (East, East Midlands, Wales and West Midlands) and South (London, South East and South West) and ethnicity (comparing those from White and BAME backgrounds), but these differences would not be statistically significant in a random sample at 0.05 level.

Struggles and worries

One in seven parents surveyed (14%), whose children are not in receipt of FSM support¹², say they have struggled to cover the costs of their child's food during the school day, since schools returned. Of this group,¹³ almost one in three parents (29%) said they had always or often struggled, while more than half (58%) had sometimes struggled to cover the costs of their child's food during the school day.

Of those who have struggled,¹⁴ four in ten (42%) said they had cut down on the amount of food they bought for themselves and their family to be able to pay for their child's food during the school day. Other ways these parents said they had covered school food costs when they had struggled was by borrowing money from friends and family (one in five, 22%), or delaying making gas and electricity payments (one in six, 17%). A small proportion (one in 20, 5% for each) reported using a food bank or borrowing money from a commercial lender.

Around one in six parents (16%) whose children are not in receipt of FSMs were very worried or somewhat worried about covering the costs of meals or snacks for their children throughout the school year.¹⁵

Other top worries for those not receiving Free School Meals¹⁶ included covering the costs of school trips (33% very or somewhat worried), costs of school uniforms (28% very or somewhat worried) and costs of books and equipment (19% very or somewhat worried).

Given the multiple pressures on parents and children this year, especially as families face income shocks and changes to family finances due to the pandemic, there is greater need than ever before to extend targeted financial support to parents and children. Free School Meals are an existing and effective mechanism through which to help parents, saving them around £400 per child per year, which is money that parents could spend on other necessary things for their children. This is particularly true for low-income families with multiple children, as there are no limits on how many children in a family can benefit from means-tested Free School Meals support.

¹² N=711

¹³ N=101

¹⁴ N= 101. Parents who struggled and whose children do not receive FSM support. Respondents could chose multiple options.

¹⁵ N=711. Parents were asked to pick from a list of worries: school trips, school uniforms, books or equipment, breakfast, meals or snacks, travel to school, additional childcare, afterschool clubs.

¹⁶ Parents were asked to pick from a list of worries: school trips, school uniforms, books or equipment, breakfast, meals or snacks, travel to school, additional childcare, afterschool clubs.

Policy Recommendations

The majority of parents whose children did not receive Free School Meals believed that more children should receive this support.¹⁷

One of the greatest levelling-up tools at the Government's disposal is Free School Meal provision. Free School Meals were first established in 1906 and despite changing eligibility requirements, the premise for doing so has remained constant – to provide a nutritional meal to children from low-income backgrounds to help them learn and develop in and out of school, on par with their peers. Given how hugely challenging this year has already been for children, especially those from low-income families who have faced income shocks due to the Covid-19 crisis, the Children's Society are calling on government to extend eligibility for means-tested Free School Meals in two ways:

Firstly, to better support low income working families, **Free School Meals should be extended to all families in receipt of Universal Credit, as recommended by the National Food Strategy**. Under this recommendation, an estimated additional 1.5 million 7-16 year olds in lower income working families would benefit from Free School Meals. This is estimated to cost an additional £670 million a year, as per the National Food Strategy calculations.¹⁸

Furthermore, it would prevent parents who might have potential to earn above the £7,400 cut off from facing a cliff edge once transitional protections for Universal Credit end in March 2022. The current earnings limit fundamentally undermines one of the main reasons for introducing UC in the first place: to ensure that 'work always pays', as many families would be left worse off if they were to take on additional work but lose their FSM provision. Analysis conducted by researchers at The University of York on behalf of The Children's Society and CPAG shows that this Free School Meals poverty trap could negatively impact a total of around 280,000 low income working families in England, containing over 700,000 children.¹⁹

Secondly, **the extension of Free School Meals eligibility to children from low income migrant families should be made permanent²⁰ – children without recourse to public funds who are living in poverty should continue to have access to Free School Meals**

¹⁷ 26% strongly agreed; 30% somewhat agreed out of N=711. Of all respondents including parents whose children receive Free School Meals (N=1002), 32% strongly agreed; 30% somewhat agreed.

¹⁸ https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/8_NFS_Report_RecommendedActionsFull.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/fsm-poverty-trap-tcs-cpag.pdf>

²⁰ In April 2020, government extended FSM eligibility to some children who have no recourse to public funds. These groups are: children of Zambrano carers, children of families with no recourse to public funds with a right to remain in the UK on grounds of private and family life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, children of families receiving support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 who are also subject to a no recourse to public funds restriction (all subject to maximum household income thresholds), plus children of a subset of failed asylum seekers supported under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (this group is not subject to a maximum household income threshold as these families are not able to work.)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/guidance-for-the-temporary-extension-of-free-school-meals-eligibility-to-nrpf-groups>

beyond the pandemic, regardless of their parents' immigration status. Many migrant families who have not yet qualified for permanent residency in the UK have No Recourse to Public Funds, which stops them accessing essential support like Universal Credit, Tax Credits and Housing Benefit, even if they cannot work during the CV-19 crisis. Many of the children in these families will have been born in the UK or have known no other home – but they usually miss out on a package of welfare support that their peers are eligible for, simply because of their parents' immigration status. Continued support through the Free School Meals mechanism will allow these children (affected by NRPF and from low-income households) to learn on a full stomach alongside and on par with their peers.²¹

Conclusion

These latest poll findings show that many families who currently do not meet the very low income thresholds for Free School Meals entitlement are struggling to cover the costs of their children's food during the school day.

Although it was not possible to identify specific parents affected by NRPF, we also know that if the current extension of Free School Meals provision to children affected by NRPF is not extended beyond December 2020, their families will be even worse off, because FSM support is one of the very few forms of support available to these families, who are otherwise denied access to the welfare system.

Extending Free School Meal Provision to all children whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit and making permanent the temporary extension of Free School Meals to children affected by NRPF are two key ways in which government can provide vital support to low-income children and families living through the effects of the pandemic.

²¹ For more on families affected by NRPF please see *A Lifeline for All: Children and Families with No Recourse to Public Funds*, The Children's Society <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/a-lifeline-for-all-summary.pdf>